



Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

Doctrinal Catechesis Sessions for adults based on
the Church Year, the Liturgy, & the Sunday Scriptures

Breaking Open the Word

by Mary Birmingham

Breaking Open the Word Fourth Sunday of Advent C



Visitation by Mariotto Albertinelli, (1503) Oil on wood. Public domain.



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Opening Prayer

Option 1. Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

Option 2.

Blessing of an Advent Wreath

Before your group lights the first candle of the Advent wreath, the following blessing may be prayed.

All make the sign of the cross.

Leader: The kingdom of God is at hand.

All respond: Blessed be the name of the Lord.

Leader: Let us call to mind God's mercy and salvation as we wait in hope during the days and weeks of Advent. As we gather around this wreath let us remember God's promise to be with us until the end of time.

Scripture is read. Isaiah 9: 1-2a.

All respond: Thanks be to God.

After a time of silence, all join in prayers of intercessions and in the Lord's Prayer.

Leader: Let us ask God to bless our wreath and to bless us.

After a short silence, the leader prays:

Heavenly Father,

We praise and thank you for the great gift of your Son Jesus, the Christ.

You sent him as a Light to the nations.

You sent him to reveal your Light and Love to a world darkened by sin.

Christ is our hope and our salvation.

Upon him we place all our trust.

He is Emmanuel, the promised Messiah.

He brings wisdom and peace to a troubled world.

Lord God,

bless this wreath and

bless those who gaze upon its light in hopeful anticipation.

Come, Lord Jesus, come in haste, come!

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

The fourth candle is lighted.

Leader: Let us praise God, the ruler of the universe.

All respond, making the sign of the cross:

The God who made heaven and earth!

The blessing concludes with a verse from "O Come O Come, Emmanuel"

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& Creed
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Doctrinal Sessions.

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Liturgical Context

- ▶ Today the liturgy concerns itself with final preparations for remembrance of the Incarnation of Christ.
- ▶ We are led more deeply into the mystery of the Incarnation and the mystery of salvation.
- ▶ The prophet Micah takes center stage today--the only time we hear from him in the three-year cycle.
- ▶ Micah foretells the coming of the future messiah.
- ▶ His message continues to speak to us today as a reminder that we are to bring Christ to birth in our hearts today as we wait for his return in the future.
- ▶ The liturgies of the last days of this season remind us that our ritual remembrance of the Incarnation of Christ, the Son of God into the world is just about here.
- ▶ Mary takes her venerated place on salvation history's stage in the liturgy of the Fourth Sunday of Advent.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, and then surface insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?
- ▶ What touched you the most in today's Gospel?

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one of the readings.

First reading: Micah 5, 1-4

- ▶ Micah's prophetic ministry occurred during the eighth century BC, the golden age of prophets.
- ▶ Micah railed against the lack of fidelity to the covenant.
- ▶ He chastised the people for their refusal to enter into a loving reciprocal relationship with God.
- ▶ He reminded them of the imperatives of biblical justice which called for the care of God's creation and ultimately God's poor, oppressed and marginalized people.
- ▶ Micah promised that God would punish them for their sins of greed, idolatry, pride, arrogance, temple prostitution and a priestly and prophetic ministry that lacked conviction.
- ▶ Micah expressed longing for a return to the great days of the Davidic monarchy.
- ▶ Bethlehem-Ephratha was the place where David's father (Judah) was born.
- ▶ Ephratha was an inconsequential clan from the tribe of Judah that made its home in Bethlehem.
- ▶ From these humble origins a future leader of Israel would emerge.
- ▶ The first Christians used this proclamation as proof text that Jesus is that future leader—the Messiah and Savior of the World.
- ▶ The future leader of Micah's prophecy would extend eternal salvation to all God's people.
- ▶ Jesus referred to Micah's prophecy in relation to himself.
- ▶ Christianity has always understood the life and mission of Christ to be the fulfillment of Micah's oracle.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two, and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story from his or her life. See appendix #1 for an example.

- ▶ How can this reading be a word for you today?
- ▶ Are we any better today than the persons Micah is chastising?
- ▶ Where does greed, idolatry, arrogance, lack of conviction in the priestly and prophetic ministry, lack of care for the poor and oppressed show its ugly head today?
- ▶ What is the voice of Advent calling us to do about it?
- ▶ Micah longs for a return to former days of Israel’s glory. What is your deepest longing?
- ▶ In what way have we prepared for the coming of the Savior that Micah foretells today?

Second Reading: Hebrews 10:5-10

- ▶ The focus of the letter to is the Hebrew/Jewish Scriptures.
- ▶ Nowhere in Scripture is there a more profound reflection on the humanity of Jesus, yet the three-year cycle of readings does include the section in the Letter that focuses on it.
- ▶ The Letter to the Hebrews helps us ground ourselves on this even of the Incarnation in what this season truly professes rather than what the culture over-sentimentalizes.
- ▶ God sent his Son to save the world from sin. Jesus comes as the ultimate sacrifice for sin rendering the sacrifices of Israel null and void.
- ▶ Jesus takes the sin of the world upon himself. Though sinless he assumes it; he makes reparation for the sin of humankind. He is the ultimate sacrifice—once and for all.
- ▶ Christmas, the feast of the Incarnation must be understood in tandem with Holy Week. Christmas and Easter are mirror feasts. Easter reflects back on the Incarnation and the Incarnation reflects ahead to the reason for the Incarnation in the first place—the death and resurrection of Christ, manifested at Easter.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story or reflection from his or her life. See appendix #2 for an example.

- ▶ What is the Good News for us today in this reading?
- ▶ While the Church does not want to diminish the excitement and joy of the Christmas celebration, it is nevertheless concerned with that we not forget the reason for the season--the Incarnation of Christ. We often become so focused on the baby Jesus that Christmas gets regarded as something for children—something that creates a sentimental longing for family and home—all good—but not the primary truth of Christmas. While children are caught up in the mystery of the BABY we must not lose sight of the sober reality: the Christ of the wooden manger would one day mount his wooden cross to die a horrid death to save the world. What might you do this year to keep the ultimate focus of Christmas alive while still enjoying the age-old sentimentality that surrounds it?
 - [One suggestion might be to write a letter to the Baby/Christ/Savior/Messiah who would one day die for the sins of the world, thanking him for so great a gift, perhaps the family might read the letter at the family dinner table.]
- ▶ What meaning for your life can be found in the Incarnation of Christ? Why is the Incarnation important to you today?

Gospel: Luke 1:39-45

Read or summarize the Gospel, perhaps provide a copy of the text for further reflection.

Gospel Exegesis

Please note: catechist may intersperse the questions at the end of the exegesis throughout your presentation where appropriate.) Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions before presenting the exegesis.

- ▶ What specifically touched you in this Gospel?
- ▶ What does this Gospel mean to you?
- ▶ Luke transitions us between the Old and New Testament with this story of the meeting of the pregnant Mary and Elizabeth.
- ▶ Luke’s intention is to reveal God’s plan of salvation. It is not an historical account of two relatives meeting prior to the delivery of one of their babies.
- ▶ Mary and Elizabeth greet one another and together give praise and glory for all God’s saving works being accomplished in and through them.

- ▶ The theology inherent in the event gives us a clear definition of who Jesus is—Savior—and who John is—precursor of the Savior. Jesus clearly is superior to John.
- ▶ Luke uses a common technique to illustrate his theology. In order to interpret an event he reviews what God has already done and he looks forward to what God will do in the future. By reviewing the birth of Jesus and John he looks forward to the redemption of humanity that will be accomplished through God's salvation plan in and through John and Jesus.
- ▶ Luke uses another technique to interpret the meaning of events. He echoes Scripture passages from the Old Testament in order to illustrate that God's plan of salvation that was foretold in Scriptures through the Law and the prophets and is now coming to fulfillment.
- ▶ The events themselves echo certain Old Testament events that are significant in God's overall plan of salvation. The leaping baby in Elizabeth's womb is a subliminal reminder of Jacob and Esau leaping in Rebekah's womb.
- ▶ Baby-leaping in the womb is a common biblical announcement that the leaping child would have a specific role and destiny to fulfill in God's plan of salvation.
- ▶ Elizabeth interpreted John's leaping for us. John would have a future role in whatever saving action God would accomplish in the future life of the baby in Mary's womb.
- ▶ Another common Biblical tool Luke uses is the role of God's instrument—in this case, Mary and Elizabeth. Both women are faithful, obedient servants who are integral to bringing God's plan to fruition.
- ▶ Mary's quick departure is a reference to the zeal and passion she brings to her appointed task—to bring Christ to birth.
- ▶ Mary is praised because of the role she would have in relationship to Christ. She is honored and praised because of that relationship. Her role is Christ-centered. She is honored because of Christ.
- ▶ Without Mary's "yes/fiat" the world would not have been saved.
- ▶ Another tool used by Luke centers on the vocation and mission of the person in question. Elizabeth was incredulous that the Mother of the Lord should come to her. Elizabeth was elucidating the future mission of the child in Mary's womb. Mary's baby would one day bring about the salvation of the human race.
- ▶ Luke clearly sets forth both John's and Jesus' mission and role.
- ▶ John will come before Jesus to clear the way for him and prepare hearts for his coming--the coming of the Messiah.
- ▶ Jesus is the Messiah.
- ▶ Both Mary and Elizabeth are paradigm of the listening believer and model disciple.
- ▶ Mary is heralded as the great model of the Church.
- ▶ Mary hears the word of God and responds to it.
- ▶ Mary said "yes" to God.
- ▶ Mary accepts her appointed task and carries it out with determination, zeal and passion.
- ▶ She is not only a hearer of the Word; she is the ultimate doer of the Word.

- ▶ She is an icon for all believers on this Fourth Sunday of Advent.
- ▶ Christmas is an invitation to say “Yes” to God as we strive to bring him more fully to birth in our lives.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface the insights in the wider group. Catechist begins by sharing story from his or her life. See appendix #3 for an example. (@ Ten-twelve minutes)

- ▶ What is the purpose of the meeting between Mary and Elizabeth? Why does Luke tell the story the way he tells it?
- ▶ What is Luke’s primary concern when it comes to John and Jesus?
- ▶ What does Luke want his readers to take away with them in this Gospel text?
- ▶ Why is this passage a relevant word for us today?
- ▶ Put yourself in the place of both women. If you were them and it was today, what would be going through your head?
- ▶ What is going on in your life right now that can find meaning in this story of Mary and Elizabeth?
- ▶ Christmas is about bringing Christ to new birth in our lives. Is there room in your life to bring him to birth? What needs to get out of the way in order to make space for Christ?
- ▶ What are the implications of this Gospel? What is the challenge?

Catechist invites participants to silently reflect on the following question. (@ three minutes)

- ▶ After reflection on today’s liturgy, what one thing is God asking of you at this time in your life?
- ▶ What obstacles stand in the way of following God’s call?

Concluding Prayer

Prayer of Pope Clement XI

Lord, I believe in you: increase my faith.
I trust in you: strengthen my trust.
I love you: let me love you more and more.
I am sorry for my sins: deepen my sorrow.
I worship you as my first beginning.
I long for you as my last end.
I praise you as my constant helper.
And I call you as my loving protector.
I want to do what you ask of me:
In the way you ask, for as long as you ask, because you ask it.
Let me love you Lord as my God.
And see myself as I really am: a pilgrim in this world.
A Christian called to respect and love all those lives I touch.

OR

Minor rite: Blessing: 95-97.

APPENDIX

1. I resonate with the longing for former glory days expressed in Micah. It is a very human emotion. What we remember about the past always seems better than the struggles of the present and fear of the future. I look with longing to a simpler time in my life—a time when faith was new and fresh, a time which seems in retrospect more exciting and purpose-filled. Hmm.

Memories sometimes have a way of being confused with a nostalgic, exaggerated imagination.

If I am truly honest with myself, those years were no easier or more purpose-filled than today. The longing for “better” days in truth is a longing for deeper intimacy with God. Every longing in the human heart is ultimately a longing for meaning and divine communion.

The wisdom of Advent waiting is that we are given the opportunity to intentionally long for that union—to set aside an entire season to indulge in the longing that God placed within our heart. God gifts every human heart with an intrinsic desire for him. The chaos and vagaries of everyday life can often blunt that quest and distract us from seeking its object. Advent gives us permission to intensify our efforts as we prepare our hearts for the rebirth of Christ within at Christmas.

2. It is very difficult to swim against the tide in a culture that experiences huge economic profit from a secular over sentimentalized celebration of Christmas. It is very difficult for Christians to maintain the focus of our waiting—the Incarnation of Christ.

Many years ago the homilist at a Midnight Mass read a poem that soberly reminded the people of the implications of Christ coming as a human being—that he would ultimately suffer, die and rise again for our sins. It was a sobering reflection.

Some people complained that Christmas is not a time to share such a serious, *sad* message. They wanted the homilist to focus his attention on the baby born in a stall. They wanted images of Santa kneeling at the crib of the Christ child to dance in their heads. While such images may be appropriate for a liturgy with children, it is hardly an adult reflection on the Christ event—the Christ who came as a man, lived, died and saved the world through a horrid torture and death and ultimately was raised to his Father thereby opening the portals of heaven for all believers.

The inherent truth of the Incarnation is that Christ became human and as a result a divine exchange took place in the human soul. Christ sanctified human life by becoming human himself. Christ lives within every human heart. Indeed he is

reborn in us every year at Christmas.

3. Both Mary and Elizabeth said “YES” to God. Mary’s yes was dangerous. Her pregnancy could have resulted in being stoned to death. Yet still she trusted God.

It is very easy to pay lip service to trust in God, another to truly live a life of complete obedience, faithfulness and trust. Right now I am being asked to trust God to care for one of my children where I simply no longer can. I am being asked to let go of my child and entrust him to God’s care.

The truth is that any control I think I have is an illusion. Even though this mid-thirties, very intelligent child is mentally ill and disabled it is beyond my power to control him. The laws of our land tell me I simply have to allow him to remain in his illness. He is not a danger to himself or others at this time and he idiotically has a right to be insane.

Our family is on the precipice of another disaster with this child. He is preparing to wander the country to profess the truths that are being revealed to him by the personalities that have taken up residence in his mind. He is very ill right now and is subject to grave danger. The mother in me tells me that I have to rescue him. The adult in me tells me I am powerless to do so. The disciple in me tells me that I have to let him go and even though he is very sick, let him find his own way. I keep thinking of the prodigal son. He had to wallow in the mud before he recognized he needed help. My child has to similarly wallow before he can recognize his illness. I fear that my letting go could result in his death. He does not have a good track record of taking care of himself. But the other truth is that I cannot stop him anyway.

Thus, what I am called to do is entrust him to God’s care. Mary knew that God’s action in her life could cause her to be stoned. It was not an easy decision. How does one tell God “no” when God asks a direct question? Mary’s entire life was in preparation for the “yes” she would offer.

My whole life has prepared me for this bold leap of faith. Do I really believe that God will lead this young man to get the care he needs? Can I truly entrust him to God’s care and then wait for God to act?

I am making the decision to let go and entrust my life and the life of my child to God. I hope and pray it is the right decision. I ask anyone who might be reading these pages to pray for this very ill young man and every time you see a homeless man on the street to pray for him or her too as more likely than not they too are someone’s very sick child.

I turn to Mary in this sorrow as I know that the baby in her womb would be the same child she would one day watch hang from a tree, tortured, misunderstood

and rejected by the world. Mary knows the sorrow of a mother's heart. Her consolation is my consolation. On this Fourth Sunday of Advent, as I wait to bring Christ to rebirth in my life, I also wait for new life, new hope and new ways to reach out to one of God's seriously ill, precious children.



Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

Mary, Model Disciple
Incarnation
Revelation I or II
Faith

Kingdom of God
Salvation
Liturgical Year

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the scope and sequence chart and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

MARY MODEL DISCIPLE

Mary is a major character in this last Sunday of Advent. She is an example of the “yes” we should all say to God when it comes to living the Christian life. Mary is our finest example of what it means to be a disciple of Christ. Today we will focus our attention on MARY in our extended session.

INCARNATION

The reason for the season of Advent is preparation for the INCARNATION of God's Son. As Christmas fast approaches we will focus our attention in today's extended session on what we believe about the INCARNATION of God's Son, Jesus Christ.

REVELATION Part I or II

What better time is there than Advent to focus our attention on God's revelation to humanity? Today's session will focus on God's REVELATION.

FAITH

Advent and today's liturgy issues a resounding clarion call to embrace the faith we have been given and to pray for the grace and the strength to grow and develop that faith. Thus, today our doctrinal focus will be FAITH and what the Church teaches about FAITH.

KINGDOM OF GOD

The season of Advent is a time we recall Christ's mandate to build the reign of God in our midst as we prepare for the coming of the Christ. Thus, today we will focus our attention on what the Church teaches about the KINGDOM OF GOD.

SALVATION

The Advent/Christmas season brings salvation history front and center in our lives. We remember the prophets and all that was proclaimed about the Christ. We hear of God's cosmic sovereignty and we celebrate the salvation that is ours through the Incarnation of God's Son. Today we will focus on the doctrinal teaching regarding SALVATION.

LITURGICAL YEAR

Three weeks ago, we began a new liturgical year—Year C. The Year of Luke. It is an appropriate time to focus our attention on the theology expressed by what we believe about the LITURGICAL YEAR. The liturgical year sets forth in liturgy God's plan of salvation in and through Christ. The Paschal Mystery of Christ is proclaimed and made manifest in the liturgical cycle. Today we are going to devote our attention to the mysteries inherent in the LITURGICAL YEAR.